

## **61 U08 Nolan at Balaklava Part XI: Veterinary Surgeon Hicks Withers on "The Charge"**

**by Dr Douglas J Austin U 08**

The National Army Museum, Chelsea holds an extensive collection of Crimean War books, objects, documents and images - very well worth on-line exploration, of course. I have come across a particular group of documents ( **NAM 1981-06-66** ) which provide a two statements of an eye-witness account of the death of Captain Nolan - as he crossed in front of the Light Brigade at the start of its advance. These accounts are entirely consistent with the other versions in my series of articles in *This Journal*.

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**"The Times" : Obituary 3rd February, 1909:-**

Mr Hicks Withers.

Mr. Hicks Withers, one of the few survivors of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, died on Sunday at Worthing in his 81st year.

Mr. Withers joined the Royal Horse Artillery as a veterinary surgeon shortly before the Crimean War, and was present at the siege of Sevastopol and the battles of Inkerman, Balaclava and Alma. In the latter battle he was wounded and narrowly escaped with his life, for when he was about to mount his horse he was injured by the splinter of a shell, which carried his busby off his head and tore the saddle off his horse's back, while another splinter killed the man holding the horse. Mr. Withers was also all through the Indian Mutiny, and was with General Havelock's forces at the Relief of Lucknow. For some considerable time he was in command of two guns owing to the dearth of officers during the campaign. On his return from India the vessel conveying the troops became a total wreck in the Red Sea, and, although few lives were lost, great hardships were endured by the troops on the coral reef before they were rescued. After his return to England Mr. Withers was gazetted to the 10th Hussars, in which regiment he remained many years. When he left the Army he adopted the surname of Lancashire, in addition to Withers, as a racing name. He owned a few steeplechase horses, the best of which were Badminton and Brunswick, the latter carrying his colours into fourth place in the Grand National.

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**OBITUARY. (Bristol newspaper):-**

**Hicks Withers M.R.C.V.S., Worthing.**

Late V.S. (1st Class) 10th Hussars. Graduated Lond: April, 1851.

One of the few remaining links connecting the past with the present, was snapped on 31st January, 1909, when Mr. Hicks Withers, or as he was known recently, Withers-Lancashire, passed away at the ripe old age of 79 years. The son of the late Mr Withers of Bristol, who was also a member of the profession, he graduated in London on 30th April, 1851, and joined the Army in March, 1854. His Army career lasted fifteen years, and into it was crowded the Campaign experiences of a life time. It has fallen to the lot of few men to have had such a wonderful record of active service, exciting experiences, and hair-breadth escapes. Immediately after joining the Army, he proceeded to Bulgaria, being posted to E Battery of the Light Division. In Bulgaria he was employed by General Sir George Brown in purchasing baggage animals. He then proceeded to the Crimea and served in the Artillery of the Light Division in the Campaign 1854-5. He was present at the affairs of the Bulganak and McKenzie's Farm; the Battles of Alma, Balaclava, Inkerman, Repulse of the sortie of 26th October, and the Siege and Fall of Sebastopol. At the "*Alma*" a shell burst close to his

horse, Mr. Wither was in the act of mounting, and the horse was being held by a shoeing-smith, who was killed, the horse being wounded; Mr. Withers was also hit by a fragment of the shell, thrown to the ground, and stunned, yet he made so light of it that he never reported sick, having, as he expressed it, "*a great deal to do for the wounded of the Battery.*" Fifty years later he obtained a wound pension. For this Campaign he received the Crimean Medal with four clasps and the Turkish Medal.

After the Campaign he proceeded to China and, the Indian Mutiny having broken out, he was sent with Capt. Middleton's Battery to India, serving throughout the Campaign 1857-59. He was present at the "*Relief of the Residency*" under Lord Clyde, and the affairs of "*Secunderagh Bagh*" and "*Shaj Nujeef*", the "*Battle of Cawnpore*", Dec: 6th, 1857, and the defeat and pursuit of the "*Gwalior Contingent*", Actions of "*Subahdar's Tauk*" and "*Serai Shat*", "*Chanda*", "*Badshaw Gunze*", "*Sultanapore*", "*Umeerpore*", "*Siege and Capture of Lucknow*", Action of "*Baree*", attack on the "*Moulvie's Mosque*" and "*Mossa Bagh*" and the affairs of "*Campore Nussia*" and "*Futteghur*", etc. During all these engagements, when not employed on professional duties, he served as orderly officer to the Artillery Commander, and finally, when though sickness there was a dearth of officers, as in the pursuit of Tantia Topee, he volunteered for subaltern's duty and took command of two guns. At the conclusion of the Mutiny, he was invalided from India with abscess of the liver, and as if he had not already gone through a sufficient number of exciting experiences, he was wrecked in the Red Sea on his way home in the "*Alma*".

After his return to England, he joined the 10th Hussars and in January, 1869, retired from the Army on account of ill-health. Such, in brief, is the record of this old soldier, who had lived long enough to see forgotten the memories of that official and political muddle, the Crimean Campaign, with all its horrors of starvation, disease, and that bitter winter on the heights above Balaclava. He lived, unfortunately, to bear testimony to the short memory of a grateful nation, whose outpourings during that Titanic convulsion in Asia rapidly vaporized when services were no longer needed. It has always been so. Services are soon forgotten; it is depressing, it may perhaps be necessary, but it is none the less bitter. To those who have lived long enough to remember these Campaigns, the above record of Hicks Withers fills a space in history. But it is only those few still left who took part in the struggle, who can fully appreciate what this gallant spirit went through during that disgracefully conducted Campaign in the Black Sea, in the historic relief of that small British garrison of Lucknow, in the heat and deadly climate, as in India then was avenging the Cawnpore massacre, and the long chase after its perpetrator. Modern campaigns are child's play compared with these, and our heart's sympathy goes out to this fine old campaigner (who we believe to be the last veterinary survivor of the double event of the Crimea and Mutiny) who at the end of a long life felt he had been officially forgotten. With an intellect unclouded to the last, he delighted in recounting his experiences, and recalling those days when British prestige hung by a slender thread.

Only as recently as last November he placed on record in the Bristol Times what, as an eyewitness, he saw of the Balaclava Charge, and the part played by Nolan, a point which has been greatly in dispute. This what he says: "In my article re the Battle of Balaclava, which you were so good as to publish, very little mention is made of Capt. Nolan's part in it, and as I am sure it is not clearly understood by many, I now relate it. In the interval between the repulse of the Russian cavalry by the 'thin red line' and their subsequent utter defeat and rout by the magnificent charges of the heavy cavalry, Capt. Nolan was sent with an order to Lord Lucan, which he delivered just after the routed enemy had passed our front. The order most undoubtedly was, '*Take up a position with your brigade nearer the enemy, and endeavour to prevent him from carrying off the captured guns.*' When the brigade moved off, Capt. Nolan fell in with the leaders, but seeing directly afterwards that, instead of inclining to the right in the direction of the captured guns and redoubts, they were taking a straight line to the entire Russian Army, he rushed his horse forward to the front of the column, crossing it waving his sword, and pointing the proper direction to take. At this moment he

was hit, apparently badly, and, swaying in his saddle, fell to the ground; his foot caught in the stirrup iron, and the frightened horse, turning around kicking, galloped back to the rear, dragging with it the unfortunate officer, who, if not killed by the shot, undoubtedly was by the kicking animal. Capt. Nolan was a very enthusiastic cavalry officer, and it is said and believed by many that he urged on the action taken by Lord Lucan; but his movements, as related above, quite contradict this, and it is safe to infer that he had no hand in that glorious but fatal charge, of which the French General Canrobert said, truly enough, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

Mr. Withers-Lancashire was slight in build, with a keen penetrating glance. His constitution must have been wonderful, his memory was excellent, and he was a first-rate raconteur. Crippled for the remaining years of his life through the injury sustained by the fragment of shell at Alma, he nevertheless took an active interest in matters, especially in horse breeding and the supply of remounts for the Army. In his earlier days he was an enthusiastic horseman and keen sportsman. He invented a safety stirrup, and to the last his mind was actively employed, buoyed up by that cheerful optimism which throughout life had been one of his strongest features, and is the basis of a truly philosophical spirit.

He has now gone, in the fullness of years, and after a life of dangerous public service denied to many. No solemn strains of music and muffled drums escort the old warrior to his last resting place, but his gallant spirit can never die. It was of such men as this that England was made, and when we and others to follow read of the horrors of the "Crimean" Campaign, and of the savage butchery of the "Indian Mutiny", we may perhaps recall Hicks Withers' record of service, and as a profession feel proud that through him and others we have borne a part in supporting the supremacy of the Empire.

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#### **A Veteran Veterinary Surgeon**

We are indebted to another correspondent for the following note: "Mr Hicks Withers has been long retired from the Army in which he served through some of the most eventful years of national history. After leaving college he joined R.H.A. and went through the Crimean and Indian Mutiny Campaigns. In the former he witnessed the immortal Charge of the Light Brigade and was only a few yards from Captain Nolan when that officer received his death wound. Only last year he contributed his personal impressions of the affair to the Bristol Times and Mirror. He was in the 10th Hussars when His Majesty the King was an officer in the regiment. He was a regular attendant at the annual dinners of the Crimean and Indian Mutiny heroes. He was born at Bristol where his father Samuel Hicks Withers was a veterinary surgeon. The father afterwards came to London, where he founded the well known firm of jobmasters which still holds such a prominent position in the metropolis.

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**Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, "The Veterinary Record", p 532, February 6, 1909:-**

#### **Balaclava By one who saw it.**

Reading an article on the Panmure papers, the saying that the "history of warfare is a history of blunders", reminded me that yesterday (Sunday) was the 54th anniversary of that colossal blunder, the Battle of Balaclava, otherwise the slaughter of the heroic Light Brigade, for it was nothing else. The incompetency and rashness of the commanding officers; the curious reading of a plainly-given order from a clear-headed Commander-in-Chief who, common-sense ought to have told them, would never have given such an insane order, knowing the position of things; how they could have interpreted it as they did is a wonder, remembering the axiom of war that cavalry should never act without support, and that infantry should always be close to them when they carry guns; there was neither of these requirements, and yet they dared to send their devoted troops, the best cavalry in the

world, to attack a large body of Russian cavalry, several battalions of infantry, and 40 guns in a strong position, with batteries of artillery ready to play on each flank - what folly! What utter madness! I had galloped up to a point on the heights above Sebastopol, in the rear of Bosquet's Camp, which gave a panoramic view of the Balaclava Valley. The light cavalry were just on the move, when a little French sentry, who had been watching the happenings, turned round to me with horror-stricken face exclaiming "*O! Monsieur, monsieur; qu'est qu'on va faire, on va-t-a mort! On va-t-a mort! On va-t-a mort!*" [ "*Oh, sir, what are they doing, they're going to death! They're going to death! They're going to death!*" ] What a simple French sentry could see in a minute, our General could not. Hardly had our cavalry moved off, when a body of Chasseurs d'Afrique, gay in their light blue and silver uniform, red overalls, with pennons flying, riding grey Arabs, came galloping past, about 200 in number. They went up on the rising ground to our left and made straight at the battery, which was dealing death to our poor men in the left flank and silenced them; but, being without support, they were obliged to retire with the loss of 50 men and two officers. Still, it was a gallant little affair. In the meantime, Captain Nolan, who had been badly hit, fell from his saddle. Our horses galloped on, losing many men as they went, and dashed at the guns, 30 in number, sabring the gunners, and falling on a body of cavalry who opened out showing a large mass of infantry. The enemy's cavalry closing in on our men, Colonel Shewell, of the 8th Hussars, with great presence of mind, got his men in some sort of line, so that the men of the different regiments might form up on them and so retire in something like order. This they did, but with great loss until they came to where the heavy cavalry had come to their assistance, they also losing many men in so doing. This terrible catastrophe was preceded by a couple of magnificent charges made by the heavy cavalry, under General Scarlett. When the Russian cavalry, retiring from their unceremonious treatment by the 93rd (Sir Colin Campbell's thin red line), came in view of our men, the trumpet sounded, and off went the Greys and Inniskillens, our first line, full charge into the middle of the Russian's first line, three times our strength. Down they went, our fellows cutting right through them, appearing in their rear, and darting straight at the second line, the wings of the first line closing in on their centre; but before this was completed our second line, the Royals and 4th and 5th Dragoon Guards, shot out like a bolt from the blue, and knocked them over like ninepins, and went on to the second line, completing what the Greys and Inniskillens had begun. The enemy in a quarter of an hour were beaten and turned and fled in great disorder and confusion back towards their camp. "Well done!" was the message sent down to General Scarlett. The light cavalry were about a quarter-mile up the valley, concealed by the undulating irregularity of the ground. The head of the defeated troops passed within 200 yards of them, and Lord Lucan **[Error : Cardigan]** was begged to fall upon and complete the ruin begun by the heavy cavalry; but, although repeatedly urged to do so, and by many Indian officers attached to his command, men of great experience, he would not take the risk for all they knew what a state the enemy's cavalry were in. Beaten and demoralised, they would have been an easy prey; their cavalry would have been annihilated; they could not have removed the guns they had captured, and the Balaclava charge would not have been needed. Our losses were 13 officers killed or missing, 160 men killed or missing, 21 officers wounded, 197 men wounded; horses killed or missing 394; horses wounded 126.

*"The awful waste of human life, The glory  
and the guilt of war. Then shook the hills with  
cannon riven; Then rushed the steed to battle  
driven; And, volleying like the bolts of  
heaven, Far flashed the red artillery."*

H. W-L., late 10th Hussars.  
*Bristol Times and Mirror*, Oct. 26, 1908.

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**Tony Margrave's "*Officers List*" provides the following details on Hick Withers:-**

Withers, Hicks (1829-1909), V.S., RA. N/l. *b*, Shirehampton, nr Bristol, Somerset, 1829, s Samuel Hicks Withers, Vet. Surgn & Martha Howell Lancashire. He used the name Hicks Withers-Lancashire in later life. Exam., Lond., April 30, 1851. MRCVS.

F/c, V.S., March 6, 1854; V.S. 1 Cl, July 1, 1859. To RA, March 6, 1854; 3rd Lt Drgns, June 25, 1861; 10th Hussars, Jan 19, 1864.

Cr War, Sept 1854, arr, Cr; Sept 20, 1854, WIA; June 30, 1855, l/abs, med, Engl; July 5 to Aug 7, 1855, p.h., abrd the *Tonning*: Bulganac, Alma, McKenzie's Farm, Balaklava, Little Inkerman, Inkerman, Siege.

China, 1857.

India, 1857-59. Ind Mut., 1857-58, Lucknow, etc, with 6/13<sup>th</sup> Bn RA.

Rtrd, staff pay, Jan 2, 1869. Commuted his retirement allowances, July 29, 1879.

*m*, 1) Bristol, Dec 9, 1851, Mary Jane d John Surman; 2) Emily Maria Susannah Thornton, rgrstd The Strand, Lond., 4th qrtr, 1891. Res. Manor Ct, East Rd, Stockbridge, Hants, 1891; Winchester Rd, Stockbridge, 1901. *d*, Jan 30, 1909.

*ODM*: Cr Med (ABIS), TCM, Mut Med (RL, L).

**Acknowledgement:-**

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